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ABSTRACT

Based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel "The Scarlet Letter," this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that the ending of a novel does not resolve all of the questions that may occur to readers; and that readers may imagine characters living out their lives beyond the ending the author gave to a novel. The main activity of the lesson involves students speculating in writing about what happened to Pearl in later life--such as a short story, a letter from Pearl as a young woman to her mother, a scene between Pearl and her mother, or a doctor's report on the cause of Pearl's death. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)

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1

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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:
The Scarlet Letter

LENGTH OF LESSON: One class period

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Summer Productions, Inc.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. The ending of a novel does not resolve all questions that may occur to readers.

2. Readers may imagine characters living out their lives beyond the ending that the author gives to a novel.

MATERIALS:
For this lesson, you will need:

The novel *The Scarlet Letter*

PROCEDURE:

1. Point out to your students that very little information about Pearl is shared at the end of *The Scarlet Letter.* All that we learn is that when Chillingworth dies, he leaves Pearl a great inheritance, making her "the richest heiress of her day, in the New World." Then Pearl leaves town, never to return. According to the novel, "None knew—nor ever learned, with the fullness of perfect certainty—whether the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave, or whether her wild, rich nature had been softened and subdued, and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness." In this project, your students will use hints in the novel, their sense of romance, their sense of tragedy, and their knowledge of human psychology to propose a logical resolution to the question "What happens to Pearl?"

2. First, establish what your students think they know from the novel about Pearl as a child. Ask them to describe Pearl based on the techniques that any author has of presenting a character to readers. That is, ask the following questions:

CS 510 932

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- What do we learn about Pearl from her appearance?
- What do we learn about Pearl from the way she talks and the way she acts?
- What do we learn about Pearl from what other people (including the author) say or suggest about her?

3. Having established some sense of who Pearl is, ask your students to discuss the following questions or scenarios relating to her life beyond the end of the novel:

- How might Pearl's childhood experiences affect her emotions and her life choices once she leaves New England?
- What basic life skills will Pearl have to learn as a young woman?
- Under what conditions might Pearl marry or have a child?
- How likely is it that Pearl might take out her anger on people in her new community? What antisocial actions might she take?
- How likely is it that Pearl would grow beyond her anger? How would Pearl display normality?
- If Pearl survives, what communication if any do you think she will have with her mother back in New England?
- What role could Pearl play in a new community—witch? religious leader who dispenses mercy and punishment? recluse? mystery woman?
- If Pearl survives and has a child, what if anything do you think she will tell the child about Hester? about Dimmesdale and Chillingworth? about Pearl's own childhood?

4. After the class discussion, give students or groups of students the following options for putting their thoughts into writing:

- Writing a short story with Pearl as a young woman of 18 as the main character
- Writing a letter from Pearl as a young woman of 18 to her mother
- Writing a scene between Pearl as a young woman of 18 and her mother, whom she goes to visit
- A doctor's report on the cause of Pearl's death at age 18

5. Let each student or group of students share the written product with the rest of the class. Ask for comments from the audience on the credibility and authenticity of how Pearl is portrayed in each original piece.

6. Finally, present the following statement and question to the class for discussion: "We can never be sure why an author does what he or she does. But we can make judgments on how an author's decision affects us as readers. How do you feel about the open ending that Hawthorne gives the novel in terms of Pearl, and why do you feel that way?"

ADAPTATIONS:

Instead of asking students, as in the main project, to imagine Pearl at age 18, ask them to imagine her at the age of 14 and to describe the kind of girl they think she has become by that age.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Some critics say that Hester Prynne was the first American heroine. Others, however, say that her somewhat silent suffering isn't truly heroic. What qualities and actions make a character heroic? Are there any heroes or heroic actions in *The Scarlet Letter*? Defend your answer.

2. If Hester Prynne is the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter*, who is the antagonist? Arguments can be made not only for Roger Chillingworth and Governor Bellingham, but also perhaps for Arthur Dimmesdale—and even for the Puritan society as a whole. Which of these characters (if any) do you believe serves as the villain in the novel? Why? What qualities and actions make a character villainous? If you believe that there are no villains in the story, why do you feel that is the case?

3. Throughout America's history, there have always been laws that regulated citizens' personal behavior. Among the Puritans of the 18th century, for example, adultery was a serious crime, as *The Scarlet Letter* makes clear. Today we have laws forcing motorcycle riders to wear helmets, laws that make suicide illegal, and laws against speeding on an empty highway, among many others. Where should society draw the line between personal and political actions? Should society have the right to tell you how to behave on your own time? Why or why not?

4. In recent years, the growing popularity of witchcraft, a neopagan religion with many traditions derived from pre-Christian and prehistoric religions, has caught the public eye. There are stores that sell witchcraft-related wares, movies with witches as heroes, and popular books about pagan religious traditions. In *The Scarlet Letter*, however, the portrayal of witches—particularly Mistress Hibbins, the sister of Governor Bellingham, is far more negative. What differences between Puritan New England and American culture today account for the fact that the practice of witchcraft is no longer considered an abhorrent crime? How has society changed during that span of time?

5. The authorities ordered Hester Prynne to wear an *A* as a punishment for her adultery, but nobody told her to make it as beautiful and elaborate as she did. The elegance of the *A*she embroidered revealed her self-pride, even in the face of her public shame. Can you think of any similar symbols that people wear today? In what ways do people change their appearance to show self-pride, even when others see those changes as sources of shame? What do our outward symbols say about us?

6. Does the character of Pearl seem realistic? Some readers of *The Scarlet Letter* think she seems much older than her age—far too mature for a young girl. Can you think of any reasons why Pearl should seem so unlike a child at times? Are children her age today ever "forced to grow up early" like that? Why? Pearl is also a very angry child—angry with her mother, in particular. Does this seem like a realistic trait as well? Why or why not?

EVALUATION:

You can evaluate students' written pieces using the following three-point rubric:

Three points: throughout, credible and authentic extension of the novel; prose smooth and, when in first person, natural sounding; error-free grammar, usage, and mechanics

Two points: mostly credible and authentic extension of the novel; prose mostly smooth and natural sounding; some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

One point: not a credible and authentic extension of the novel; prose not sufficiently smooth or natural sounding; many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

You can ask your students to contribute to the assessment rubric by determining criteria for *credible* and *authentic*.

EXTENSION:

Outcast Drama
The Scarlet Letter can be seen as a story of the conflict between a law or a sentence, on the one hand, and a personal code of ethics, on the other. Hester Prynne, for her objection to her community's laws against adultery, becomes an outcast, separated from regular social interaction. Lead a discussion about other cases in which a law or a legal sentence conflicts with a person's morality. Examples might range from draft resisters to potential jurors who cannot sit on a criminal trial because they object to the punishment that would be meted out if the defendant were found guilty. Proceed to asking students to consider potential dramatic moments in which law or sentence and morality conflict. When students have developed a list of possibilities, divide the class into groups, and ask each group to write a small dramatic scene featuring a hero or heroine who morally objects to a law or sentence. When their scenes are complete, they can perform them for the rest of the class.

Threatened Communities
Hester Prynne's adultery was viewed as a threat to the pious Puritan community in which she lived. Ask your students to brainstorm a list of actions that might be considered a threat to the cohesiveness of their school community. Examples might include rooting for the opposing team at a school sporting event, plagiarism, or excessive cliquishness; obviously, some of these acts are more threatening to the school community than others. How does your class suggest perpetrators of such acts be punished, if at all? In considering this question, remind students of the punishment of the red *A*. Can students think of suitable ways to deal with those who they think are threatening their community?

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Understanding the Scarlet Letter
Claudia Durst Johnson. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995.
This study of Hawthorne's famous novel contains historical documents, private journals, sketches, and newspaper stories of 17th-century Puritan New England. Each section of this literary companion provides study questions, topic ideas for reports, and a list of extended readings. Designed as a resource for students and teachers, it also encourages readers to find current relevance in Hester Prynne's story.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter: Bloom's Notes
Harold Boom, ed. Chelsea House Publishing, 1998.
This study guide explores the questions of choice and morality presented in Hawthorne's novel. It provides helpful aids to beginning American literature students along with a collection of critical essays.

WEB LINKS:

Penguin Putnam Inc. Online: Academic Arena
Select the online teachers guide for teaching the novel *The Scarlet Letter*.
http://www.penguinputnam.com/academic/index.htm

EDSITEment: Hawthorne: Author and Narrator
Lesson ideas for the Scarlet Letter.
http://edsitement.neh.gov/guides/g2_a1.htm

Nathaniel Hawthorne
Extensive links of sites relating to Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* including an e-text.
http://eldred.ne.mediaone.net/nh/hawthorne.html

Internet School Library Media Center: Early American Literature 1600 - 1900, Resources for K-12
Sources of texts, biography, criticism and lesson plans for teachers from the Colonial Period through the 19th century.
http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/amlit.htm

The Scarlet Letter, by Nathaniel Hawthorne
Read a 1886 review of The Scarlet Letter from Atlantic Monthly. Have opinions changed in one hundred years?
http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/classrev/scarlet.htm

VOCABULARY:

hypocrisy
A feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not, especially the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion.
Context:
The Scarlet Letter is a slow, tortuous dance of guilt, hypocrisy, and vengeance that ends in tragedy.

illegitimate
Not recognized as lawful offspring; born of parents not married to each other.
Context:
Hester's illegitimate child, Pearl, grows into a lively, perceptive child.

imp
A small demon; a mischievous child.
Context:
Pearl is defined throughout the novel as sort of an imp who behaves rather badly.

retribution
Something given or exacted in recompense; punishment.
Context:
It was meant for retribution, too, a torture to be felt, a constant reminder in the midst of a troubled joy.

scaffold
A platform on which a criminal is executed or punished.
Context:
After Hester's appearance on the scaffold, she and Pearl are taken to prison.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in general skills and strategies for reading literature.

Benchmarks:

Benchmark: Identifies the simple and complex actions (e.g., internal/external conflicts) between main and subordinate characters in texts containing complex character structures.

Benchmark: Analyzes the effects of complex literary devices on the overall quality of a work (e.g., foreshadowing, flashbacks, progressive time, digressive time).

Benchmark: Analyzes the effectiveness of complex elements of plot (e.g., setting, major events, problems, conflicts, resolutions).

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates a familiarity with selected literary works of enduring quality.

Benchmark: Demonstrates a familiarity with a variety of classic American, British, and world literature and their authors (e.g., through literary allusions and literary criticism).

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: U.S. history

Standard: Understands how political institutions and religious freedom emerged in the North American colonies.

Benchmark:
Understands characteristics of religious development in colonial America (e.g., the major tenets of Puritanism and its legacy in American society; the dissension of Anne Hutchison and Roger Williams, and Puritan objections to their ideas and behavior; the presence of diverse religious groups and their contributions to religious freedom; the political and religious influence of the Great Awakening).

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Video Information and Comprehension Questions

Video Description
Although written in the 19th century, the story of Hester Prynne, branded with a large, red "A" because of her adulterous relationship with a young minister, explores questions still asked today: What is moral? And what is good?

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TITLE OF VIDEO:
The Scarlet Letter

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Puritans come to America?

2. Why was Hester Prynne perceived as a threat to her Puritan community?

3. Hester keeps secret the fact that Reverend Dimmesdale is Pearl's father. What secret does she keep for Roger Chillingworth?

4. How does Dimmesdale convince Governor Bellingham to let Hester keep Pearl?

5. What qualities often led to the accusation of a person being a witch in Puritan New England, like Governor Bellingham's sister Mistress Hibbins in *The Scarlet Letter*?

6. What physical sign convinces Roger Chillingworth that Arthur Dimmesdale is Hester's secret coconspirator?

7. How do Dimmesdale's secret feelings of despair and guilt affect his preaching and his standing among his fellow Puritans?

8. Many of the settings in *The Scarlet Letter* symbolize different ideas and emotions. What do the prison, the cemetery, and the forest—both in sunlight and in darkness—symbolize for Nathaniel Hawthorne?

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The Scarlet Letter

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. Why did Puritans come to America?
Puritans came to America to be free from the Church of England. They came to New England dedicated to the purification of their faith and determined to settle colonies and a godly society that would serve as a model for the United States.

2. Why was Hester Prynne perceived as a threat to her Puritan community?
Hester's adultery was considered a crime because it was perceived as a threat to the law, faith, and morality of the Puritan community.

3. Hester keeps secret the fact that Reverend Dimmesdale is Pearl's father. What secret does she keep for Roger Chillingworth?
Hester keeps secret the fact that Roger Chillingworth is her husband, who has been presumed dead.

4. How does Dimmesdale convince Governor Bellingham to let Hester keep Pearl?
Dimmesdale tells the governor that Pearl acts both as Hester's lone blessing and as a kind of retribution—a constant reminder of her shameful act.

5. What qualities often led to the accusation of a person being a witch in Puritan New England, like Governor Bellingham's sister Mistress Hibbins in *The Scarlet Letter*?
In Puritan New England, anyone who acted strangely—male or female—risked being accused of being a witch. Most commonly, however, any women who were perceived as overly proud, discontented, angry, envious, or malicious were accused of being witches.

6. What physical sign convinces Roger Chillingworth that Arthur Dimmesdale is Hester's secret coconspirator?
When Chillingworth discovers an *A*branded into Dimmesdale's chest, he realizes that Dimmesdale must be Hester's secret coconspirator.

7. How do Dimmesdale's secret feelings of despair and guilt affect his preaching and his standing among his fellow Puritans?
As Dimmesdale sinks deeper and deeper into despair over his guilt, his preaching becomes more and more powerful and evocative for his congregation. They begin to see him as utterly holy and sanctified.

8. Many of the settings in *The Scarlet Letter* symbolize different ideas and emotions. What do the prison, the cemetery, and the forest—both in sunlight and in darkness—symbolize for Nathaniel Hawthorne?
The prison symbolizes repression and the cemetery symbolizes sorrow. In sunlight, the forest is a place of freedom, but in darkness, it begins to stand for evil.

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